
A new wave of boomers

By Erica Schlaikjer
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Want to know what Chicago's workforce will look like in 30 years? Take a walk through Pilsen and Logan Square, or drive through Cicero, Aurora or Waukegan.

Since the 1970s, Hispanics have grown from small immigrant communities to the largest minority group in the region, accounting for one in every five people in metropolitan Chicago in 2006.

Although the 1.7 million Hispanics in the Chicago area represent many countries, more than two-thirds trace their roots to Mexico, with the next- biggest group coming from Puerto Rico. As the non-minority population drops, Hispanics are surging ahead, accounting for 96% of the population growth in the six-county area between 2000 and 2006. And for the first time, suburban Hispanics outnumber those living in the city.

Another shift: The majority of the recent growth was fueled by births, not migration. Most are young U.S. citizens — and, some would argue, they are poised to take over the jobs of retiring baby boomers. At the current rate, the number of Hispanics in the metro area is expected to swell to one-third of the population by 2030.

"If you want to be concerned about the region's overall health, you have to address the needs of the Latino population," says Robert Dean, principal regional planner at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

MAP is developing Go to 2040, the area's first comprehensive transportation and land-use plan that will include recommendations on how to provide for the rapid growth of the Hispanic community. "We need to make sure everybody has transportation, affordable housing options, a good job and an appropriate education," he says.

One thing is certain: As Hispanics' numbers increase, so does their impact on the economy. In Illinois, the number of Hispanic-owned businesses grew by 28%, to almost 40,000, between 1997 and 2002, the latest year for which data was available. Nationwide, the number of Hispanic-owned businesses grew three times faster than the average for all businesses during that period. And in Illinois alone, Hispanic firms generated \$7.4 billion in annual revenue in 2002.

"There is a tremendous future and potential for the majority of Latinos, who are in fact U.S. citizens, to have economic mobility to achieve the American dream that everybody desires," says Sylvia Puente, director of the Metropolitan Chicago Initiative for the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Latino Studies.

SLOW PROGRESS

Many Hispanics hold high-level positions in fields like medicine, law, marketing and finance. But they are underrepresented in the top tiers of the corporate world, where they held only 3% of Fortune 500 board seats in 2006, according to the Hispanic Assn. on Corporate Responsibility.

▶ PLAYING THE PERCENTAGES

Hispanics have long held jobs in manufacturing and construction, where their numbers are well-represented. But as the Hispanic population grows, they are expected to hold a larger number of jobs in less-traditional fields such as finance.

CHICAGO WORKFORCE

Percentage of male workforce that is Hispanic

Construction

39.2%

Manufacturing

52.2%

Finance, insurance, real estate, rental and leasing

13.9%

Food service, arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodations

38.5%

Percentage of female workforce that is Hispanic

Construction

13.8%

Manufacturing

50.1%

Finance, insurance, real estate, rental and leasing

19.8%

Food service, arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodations

28.1%

Source: Institute for Latino Studies

For the most part, Hispanics, who account for 27% of the Chicago workforce, are employed in unskilled, low-paying jobs, earning a median annual household income of \$44,000, compared with \$68,000 among non-Hispanic whites.

That's largely the result of a lack of education. In the Chicago metro area, 24% of U.S.-born and 9% of foreign-born Hispanics over the age of 25 had college degrees in 2006, compared with 55% of their non-minority peers. And the percentage of high school graduates is the lowest of all racial groups, at 58%, compared with 81% for black and 92% for non-Hispanic white students.

That's because many immigrants lack the time, schooling and English skills to help their children advance, experts say.

Hispanics with good educations still face long odds, however, due to a lack of professional connections.

"One of the reasons Latinos are so underrepresented in corporate leadership is, even if they have the right education and experience, their professional network is very small," says Andrea Saenz, executive director of

the Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement, a Chicago non-profit that hosts job fairs and runs mentoring programs to help students and young professionals get jobs at companies like Walgreen Co., Sara Lee Corp. and Abbott Laboratories.

Most foreign-born Hispanic men in Chicago are working in manufacturing, construction, transportation, food service, and building and grounds cleaning and maintenance. Foreign-born Hispanic women do similar work, but they also have jobs in office administration and retail sales.

Those born in the United States have slightly better jobs than their immigrant peers, but most of those are better-paying blue-collar positions, like machine operators, or semi-skilled white-collar jobs, like administrative assistants. That, some say, has the potential to hold everyone back.

"If we don't have well-educated Latinos in Chicago, you're going to have more poor communities," says Gloria Castillo, president of Chicago United, a non-profit that promotes diversity in business. "It's going to affect our tax base, it's going to affect our ability to develop a well-qualified workforce, and it's going to affect our ability to attract large corporations."

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